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SUBJECT Anti-Castro Terrorist Linked to Contras

BOB EDWARDS: Two weeks ago the Nicaraguan government charged that Cuba exile Luis Posada, who is accused of being an international terrorist, was working with the Nicaraguan rebels known as Contras. Posada, a fugitive from a Venezuelan prison, is accused of masterminding the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airliner. Now telephone records made available last weekend have provided the first independent evidence linking the Contras and Posada, a man who's been trying for more than 25 years to bring down Cuba's leader Fidel Castro.

NPR's John Dingus reports.

JOHN DINGUS: On October 5th, 1976, an Air Cubana DC-8 was on its weekly flight from Barbados to Havana with 73 people aboard. A bomb destroyed the plane in midair only minutes after takeoff. There were no survivors. The disaster ranked among the most deadly acts of international terrorism that had yet occurred.

Luis Posada and three other Cuban exiles living in Venezuela were charged with the crime. Their trial dragged on for years, shifting from civilian court to military court and back again, while the four men languished in prison.

In August last year, Posada bribed a guard and escaped. Six months ago he surfaced to give an interview for a Miami television documentary. He proclaimed his innocence and spoke matter-of-factly about the airplane bombing, claiming that many of the passengers were Cuban intelligence agents.

TRANSLATOR: The airplane was bombed about five miles from Barbados in international waters. It fell right into the

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sea. There were people of all kinds on board: a delegation of athletes, a group of eight North Korean diplomats. There were about 22 or 23 Cuban intelligence agents, plus the crew.

The explosion of the plane brought with it an enormous international reaction.

DINGUS: Almost ten years later to the day, Posada has become a key figure in another air disaster story, the crash last month of an American cargo plane in Nicaragua. That plane was shot down by Sandinista troops while ferrying weapons to the Contra rebels. The sole survivor, Eugene Hasenfus, reportedly was shown a photo of Luis Posada by his Nicaraguan captors. Sandinista officials claimed that Hasenfus said he knew the man in the picture as Ramon Medina, one of his bosses in the Contra supply missions.

The Nicaraguan claim was questionable. The Sandinistas had a clear political interest in linking a known terrorist suspect, Posada, with the Contras and their U.S. backers. But now records obtained from the Salvadoran telephone company provide the first corroborating evidence that Medina may really be Posada. The records show that calls were made last July from Medina's house in San Salvador to Posada's wife and to two friends in Miami.

Mrs. Posada refused to discuss her husband's whereabouts, saying only, quote, "Now is the time to keep quiet." Unquote. the Miami Herald reported, however, that Mrs. Posada and the other two people acknowledged receiving calls from Posada in recent months.

One was Dr. Alberto Hernandez, the Posadas' longtime family physician. Dr. Hernandez is also an activist in Cuban exile efforts to provide aid to the Nicaraguan Contras. He visited Contra bases in Honduras earlier this year to help set up a field hospital to treat wounded soldiers.

The other friend of Posada's to receive calls was Bay of Pigs veteran Sela Cuervo (?). Cuervo and Hernandez serve on a committee to raise money for the defense of Posada and the other defendants in the airliner bombing.

Posada's only public statements since his escape 14 months ago have been to protest the charges against him. Last May Posada's associates went to great expense to arrange a clandestine interview on the case with a Miami television crew and a Venezuelan journalist. Rafael del Naranco (?) writes for the Caracas daily El Mundo. He said he considers himself a specialist in the Cuban airlines bombing and a friend of Posada's.

TRANSLATOR: When I met him, he had on a beard that was totally false. I could tell it wasn't natural. He was wearing a hat like the guerrillas wear. He had on dark glasses. I didn't know it was him until he spoke. He told me certain things and I recognized his voice and I knew I was talking to Luis Posada.

DINGUS: To get to the meeting, del Noranco said, he was first flown to Miami. A private jet then flew him to an airfield in what he believes was a remote area of southern Mexico. From there, a single-engine plane took him somewhere in Central America and landed on a dirt strip in a tropical area.

At first, he said, he didn't know he was in El Salvador.

TRANSLATOR: I got information from another source that that was where he was. Apparently, his friends had made contact with President Duarte so he could stay in that country.

DINGUS: Posada's desire for secrecy has been a characteristic of his long career as an anti-Castro warrior. He received CIA training and gained a reputation for fearlessness in behind-the-lines actions during the Bay of Pigs invasion.

After the invasion, he continued with the CIA. Then he went to Venezuela, where he found his anti-communist zeal and his skills in explosives and undercover work were a marketable combination.

Del Naranco:

TRANSLATOR: He was a member of the CIA for many years. He worked for the CIA. He came here to work in the state security forces. He had contacts at the very highest level.

DINGUS: In Venezuela, Posada was one of several CIA-trained Cubans hired by the security forces, known as DSIP (?). Posada became chief of operations and contributed counter-insurgency techniques that were credited with a major role in putting down the leftist guerrilla movement.

But Posada's abiding objective was the military defeat of Fidel Castro. In 1976, the year of the airliner bombing, Posada met with other Cuban militants in the Dominican Republic to form a coalition of united revolutionary organizations, known as CORU. Within weeks, Cuban diplomatic facilities in five countries were bombed.

The leader of CORU was a mild-looking pediatrician, Orlando Bosch, who was once linked by the FBI to a plot to kill Henry Kissinger and is still on the FBI wanted list for terrorist actions.

Shortly after the airliner bombing, Bosch came to Venezuela. When the bombing occurred, CORU claimed responsibility. Posada and Bosch were arrested on charges of being the intellectual authors of the plot. Bosch is still in prison in Venezuela.

The case remains officially undecided, but an American intelligence official who has studied the case from the beginning had this remark about Posada's alleged involvement: "No question, he's dead guilty."

The White House has denied any knowledge of Posada's presence in El Salvador, but Administration officials have acknowledged they were aware of private supply efforts and have close contacts with the Salvadoran military, which runs the base the Contra supply operation was using.

The reports of Posada's central role in that operation raise questions of possible complicity by the Contra leadership and the Salvadoran government in harboring a fugitive wanted in connection with a major act of terrorism. The reports could be clearly damaging to the Contra movement's efforts to rid itself of past accusations that their ranks contain men guilty of criminal acts and human rights abuses.

Luis Posada's current whereabouts are unknown. His last words in the Miami television documentary indicate he plans to be heard from again, in deeds if not in words.

TRANSLATOR: I feel good here because I am fulfilling a duty, that I am involved once again in a fight that is ours, a fight against international communism, against Castro in all parts of the world.

DINGUS: Terrorist suspect Luis Posada, reported to be a coordinator of Contra supply missions to Nicaragua.